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ABSTRACT

The support of the Ford Foundation for higher education research, and specifically policy-oriented studies, is discussed. The first commonality of Ford Foundation-sponsored policy studies is the existence of a commonly perceived problem (e.g., the Commission on Minorities studied equity/affirmative action). A second commonality of Ford's work is that decision makers need alternative scenarios, as well as data and analysis, that provide clear choices. The third commonality of sponsored studies involves built-in avenues for dissemination. It is important to involve a practitioner in the early stages of the research design to help insure that the research will be useful. Finally, regardless of the topic, the researcher must be sensitive to differential impact based on race, gender, and class. While not all Ford Foundation grants focus on minority or women's issues, each grant takes into account the differential impact of gender, race, and class. Topics about community colleges that were generated by the Ford Foundation in the last year are identified. (SW)

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Alison Bernstein

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This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, March 12-14, 1984. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

A Foundation Officer's Advice to Young Researchers

Alison Bernstein

Talk at Association for Study of Higher Education (ASHE)

March 13, 1984

When Estela Bensimon asked me to come to Chicago to discuss research which is sponsored by foundations like Ford, I thought "are you kidding? I'd be eaten alive!" I'm not a higher education researcher, I've had no social science methodological training, I thought I was doing well when I discovered that S.P.S.S. was a computer program, not a supersonic airplane. As Estela and Dick Johnson will tell you, I focus on program development, grant-making, off-and-on administration, and teaching and researching 20th Century American History. In that last capacity, I'm infinitely more comfortable roaming the National Archives than doing an ERIC search. Moreover, I could make a blanket statement about Ford, and certainly FIPSE, my former stomping grounds, that neither funding agency supports research on higher education per se. In fact, there is a disinclination to consider basic research -- how to improve it; or even how to disseminate it more effectively to a waiting and eager audience. Yet, as I prepared for this session, I compiled a list of recent Ford

Foundation-sponsored publications and emerging reports which might put the "big lie" to the conventional wisdom that Ford does not support higher education research. Consider:

1) David Brenneman's Financing Community Colleges and The Coming Enrollment Crisis
2) Alexander Astin's Commission on Minorities in Higher Education
3) Kay Moore's Leader's in Transition
4) ACE's Analysis of Student Aid Data Recipients
5) CUPA's Study of Presidential Compensation
6) Walter Allen's and Michael Nettle's Work on Black Students' Experiences on White/Black campuses
7) Michael Winston and William Trueheart's Histories of Historically Black Colleges
8) Jack Schuster and Howard Bowen's study of the future of the professoriate
9) And, of course, Ford's continuing support for research efforts monitoring desegregation efforts in the Adams states.

This list is not exhaustive, and yet it gives some indication of our involvement with what you call higher education research, and what we call policy-oriented studies. For as desparate as this list of items and topics seems, there is some method and message in our madness, and I want to try and decode this message for you.

The first theme these reports and research projects have in common is that they represent more than a single researcher working alone following his/her own curiosity. While there is nothing wrong with that approach -- in fact it has yielded among the most important breakthroughs in science -- it is not usually the way foundations do business with some obvious and noteworthy exceptions.

Instead, our projects involving significant research and policy-analysis usually emerge because several people including public decision-makers, administrators, foundation types, have noticed a problem -- a gap in our understanding of what is happening and why. The first commonality of Ford Foundation-sponsored policy studies then is the existence of a commonly perceived problem. In the case of the Commission on Minorities, how are we doing on the equity/Affirmative Action front? Setting up a commission to address the problem is only one kind of strategy. We might have held a competition to fund individual research, but that would not have been as systematic or carried the same impact. A dozen or more graduate students worked on the various technological reports issued by the Commission on Higher Education of Minorities (CHEM). It remains the single, most definitive work, and most expensive report on this topic completed in the last 15 years.

A second commonality of Ford's work is related to the first, but differs slightly in the audience for the finished product. Its not just that decision-makers need data and analysis. They also need alternative scenarios. For example, if we change this student aid formula to address the

most needy, this is what will happen. Policy-makers are a lay audience. They do not want easy answers, but they do want clear choices. They expect an analysis that is capable of explaining complex issues, laying out options in communicative ways.

I have had first-hand experience with the question of audience at Ford. At FIPSE, where all staff came from higher education, all spoke the same jargon. Furthermore, everyone we talked with spoke like us, so no one ever misunderstood our rhetoric. Occasionally a Board member would ask us what we meant by "competency-based, learning assessment portfolios", and we would have a ready, if not always jargon-free answer. At Ford, there is no common educationese. Higher education is one program out of six program divisions. A high preminium is placed on clear thinking and clear writing in each division. This adds up to the perception that researchers in higher education ar not seen at Ford as policy-analysts as long as they are only writing for each other, and facing off in the pages of an obscure journal. Turning a research project into a policy study requires, at the very least, asking a set of questions that other people care about. For example, our grant to Professor Walter Allen at the University of Michigan to produce a longitudinal study of Blacks on White and Black campuses was made to help administrators understand how multiple college environments affect black students. We have no vested interest in determining which environment is better; but we are concerned about knowing how each affects different types of black students.

The third commonality of Ford-sponsored research policy studies involves built-in avenues for dissemination. We want to know who will do something with your research. The Association of Governing Boards was trying to educate its trustees with Brenneman's The Coming Enrollment Crisis. Desegregation studies are directly related to lawyers and judicial decisions regarding compliance. I'd refer people to Lindbloom and Cohen's Useful Knowledge which makes the point about dissemination better than I could. To help insure that your research will be useful, I will risk giving direct advice to young scholars. It's a good idea to get a practitioner involved in the early stages of your research design. Share it with that practitioner to see her/his reaction in terms of the value of what you are doing. Virginia Smith and I once wrote that researchers have a tropism for measuring what can be measured. Some of the most interesting questions cannot be handled easily, and those that can often aren't worth asking. Involving an informed practitioner from the beginning is bound to raise questions you haven't considered.

Finally, regardless of the topic, we believe that the researcher must be sensitive to differential impact based on race, gender, and class. Not every grant we make focuses on minority or women's issues, but each grant takes in account the differential impact of gender, race and class. Whatever topic peaks your interest, you must be willing, indeed eager, to see how your hypothesis and methodology, let alone conclusions, acknowledges these issues. We are currently involved in a line of work focused on community colleges. Given what I've said about race, class, gender, it's not hard to see why this

sector is of special interest to Ford. It is also true that it has been an over-looked sector in terms of research. Apart from early essays by Burton Clark, Jerome Karable, Arthur Cohen, Steven Zwerling and later work by Pat Cross, Dave Brenneman, Richard Richardson, Louis Bender, the field is virtually untouched. When Ford began work in this area last summer, we generated enough policy-oriented questions about community colleges to fill the future work-life of every graudate student present. The topics we generated were:

1) Are there longitudinal studies of community colleges' students which follow the same student throughout the undergraduate years and afterwards? If so, how effective are community colleges in job placement, transfer to 4 year colleges, enhancing skills, and upward economic mobility?

2) Is there a generally-agreed on, commonly-understood definition of transfer? If so, could we get comparative system and statewide statistics for similar socio-economic groups?

3) Do community colleges track minorities into certain fields? If so, how? What role do unions and external licensing groups play in this? The same question could be asked of tracking women into sex-stereotyped fields.

4) What evidence is there that attending a community college improves a student's general skills (reading, writing, computation)? Are there cheaper, faster ways to do it -- job corps, community service, etc.?

5) Has the demographic nature of community colleges faculty shifted in the last 20 years? In what ways? Number of Ph.D.s on the faculty? Are these people who failed to get tenure somewhere else?

6) Is the community college sector as much a ghetto for faculty and administration as it is for students? i.e. with the same credentials, can these professionals transfer to four year colleges to continue their careers? Are they being "cooled-out," to borrow Burton Clark's phrase, too?

These questions do not even begin to address governance, management, and financing issues. I mentioned these instructional and academic affairs topics to give you a sense of the kind of questions I am asked by people outside higher education; they are also the questions I ask myself. I am not encouraging you to go out tomorrow and submit a proposal to the Ford Foundation. However, in the spirit of adventure, I might suggest that you take your finely-tuned analytical skills down to a local community college and inquire whether they have an office of institutional research. If they do, it may have a nice, untouched data base which you can get your hands on. If no data base exists, which is more likely, you might just find yourself a job. In any event, this kind of close involvement with a community college will no doubt inspire countless dissertations, and help you turn this research task into useable knowledge for others.